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## A Study of a Condolence Letter Decorated with Bunches of Flowers Written by Raja Ali to Jan Jacob van Rochussen

MU'JIZAH

### ABSTRAK

*Surat Melayu beriluminasi telah berkembang lama di Nusantara. Buktinya adalah surat Raja Ali dari Pulau Penyengat, Riau, yang ditulis pada tahun 1749 dan dikirim kepada Jan Jacob van Rochussen. Surat ini sangat unik dengan hiasannya sangat bervariasi. Motif yang dipakai adalah dua jambak bunga dengan bunga mawar, bunga matahari dan bunga krisan. Hiasan lainnya adalah tebaran bunga kenanga dan rangkaian swastika. Iluminasi dengan tinta emas ini ternyata bukan hanya digunakan sebagai hiasan, tetapi juga ada maknanya. Makna itu tersembunyi dalam simbol yang dipakai. Dalam tulisan ini dibincang sekilas pemaknaan simbol dalam iluminasi yang dikaitkan dengan isi surat yang berupa ucapan dukacita atas wafatnya Raja Willem. Untuk mengetahui gaya surat pada masa lalu, format surat dideskripsi secara rinci. Dalam tulisan ini dilampirkan juga foto surat dan transliterasinya.*

*Kata kunci: Iluminasi, surat takziah, lambang, kolofon, ilustrasi*

### ABSTRACT

*Malay letters have long been a source of illumination in Nusantara. For example a letter that was written by Raja Ali from Pulau Penyengat, Riau, in 1749 to Jan Jacob van Rochussen bears physical aesthetics such as the patterns and various decorations that are not only beautiful but also unique. Two bouquets of flowers that consist of roses, sunflowers and chrysanthemums graced the motif that was used. Patterns were also made of flowers from the shrub tree and swastika signs. These decorations were also a source of information that was hidden in its symbolism. This paper will highlight the implicit meanings of these decorative symbols used in letters that carried the grave news of the death of King Willem. A description of the classical format used in these letters will be inserted into the analyses. A picture of the actual letter and transliteration of this letter will accompany this paper.*

*Key words: Illumination, condolence letter, symbol, colophon, illustration*



## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I have chosen to describe in detail the letter from Raja Ali because the illustration is excitingly unique. There are three issues that will be pursued in this paper, namely (1) the format of the letter, (2) the content of the letter, (3) a description of the illustration and the relation between the illustration and the text.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When Sultan Muzaffar (1834-1857) became Sultan in Penyengat Island, Riau, the General Governor in Batavia was Jan Jacob Van Rochussen (1845-1851). Sultan Muzaffar Syah succeeded Sultan Abdul Rachman (1819-1832) who on October 23, 1830, had reached an agreement with the Netherlands after the latter had occupied the whole of Riau Island. The island had been divided in 1824 into two in accordance with the London Treaty, shared between the British and the Dutch. In *Riau History* (1977), it is stated that the Dutch had signed several agreements in order to maintain its influence on the island. One of these was with Sultan Abdul Rachman, in which the Sultan accepted the government of Hindia Belanda as the higher power wielding the right to choose the Resident as its representative to be based at Tanjung Pinang, the port in Riau. In return, the government of Hindia Belanda gave recognition to the sultan and protection to his family. The sultan also retained control over Riau Lingga and subsidiary areas. The government of Hindia Belanda also recognized the Yang Dipertuan Muda Kerajaan Melayu Riau, but demanded that the position be held someone representing the Bugis population of Penyengat Island.

In the eighteenth century, the Bugis had intermarried into Malay nobility and their descendants had retained the two highest court positions of being sultan and Yang Dipertuan Muda. Bugis expansion in trade and territory prompted Dutch intervention in the 1780 (Matheson 1983). The subsequent agreement stated that the Sultan would therefore govern together with the Yang Dipertuan Muda and the Riau Resident. The Dutch Resident had the last say concerning the political activities of the other two. Whenever a new Sultan took the throne, he had to declare his loyalty to the government of Hindia Belanda. The Dutch Resident answered to the General Governor of Hindia Belanda in Batavia, and Jan Jacob Van Rochussen held that position in 1845-1851.

Raja Ja'far was the Yang Dipertuan Muda who had also signed the agreement, and sworn loyalty to the government of Hindia Belanda. When he passed away on 18 December 1831, the position was taken over by one of his sons, Raja Abdurrahman. When the young man suddenly died on 2 August 1832, he was replaced by his son, Sultan Mahmud Syah (1832-1834), who had



spent his whole life in Pahang, and who at the age of 15 was declared Tuanku Besar. Sultan Mahmud Syah soon took the title Sultan Muzaffar Syah (1834-1857). At that time, the Yang Dipertuan Muda was Raja Ali (Yang Dipertuan Muda VIII). He was a cousin of Raja Ali Haji. According to Abu Hassan Sham (1993: 15), after Raja Ali became Yang Dipertuan Muda, academic activities increased, and religion and literature flourished. He was a good Muslim who imported religious teachers from outside Penyengat Island. Sultan Muzaffar Syah exerted great influence over his realm, and also in Johor, Terengganu and Pahang. His services were often sought by the colonialists to do battle with their enemies. However, two days after the Nieuwenhuyjen became Resident of Riau on 9 October 1857, Sultan Muzaffar Syah was removed from his position. All his treasures were removed and presented to Sultan Badrul Alam Syah (1857-1883).

#### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The aforementioned letter in the *Catalogue of Golden Letters* at the National Archives in Jakarta is listed as number 4 with the heading “The Letter of Raja Ali from Riau (Penyengat Island) to General Governor of Hindia Belanda, 15 Sya’ban 1265 H”. The size of this one-page manuscript is 43 cm × 33 cm. There is a clear trace of a fold, showing that the letter was folded to be put into an envelope, which has since gone missing. The total number of rows is 22 and the space between them is 0.5 cm. The distance between text and “colophon” is about 5 cm. At the end of the letter is stated the date, and the statement *Termaktub di dalam istana kita Negeri Riau, Pulau Penyengat, kepada 15 hari bulan Sya’ban al-mu’azim yaum al-Jum ‘at waktu pukul jam lima tarikh sanah 1265*.

The paper is very glossy, white and has no watermarks. Unfortunately, a thin cartoon paper had once been adhered to its back. Such was also the case for another letter, the one from Adipati Arya Suryakesuma of Madura. This makes the paper difficult to identify. The letter was written in black ink in Jawi script. Some parts of it are written in larger script than other parts, such as the introduction, the names of person and paragraph signs, for example, *wa ba’duhu*.

There is a seal at the right margin, and also in the centre of the letter. The seal is a eight-petal circle with diameter 3.25 cm. The background of the seal is black and the letter is white. The seal is not rough but is very glossy as if integrated with the paper. The text is written in Latin and also Jawi. The Latin states “Radja Ali Onder Koning van Riouw”, while the Jawi states “Beribu elu-elu Maharaja Besar Duli Almarhum Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ja’far”. Overall, the letter is in relatively good condition, but parts of the edges are torn, and some of the script is hard to read due to faded ink. The attractive illustration will be explained later.



## CONTENT OF THE LETTER

The content suggests a close relation between the Yang Dipertuan Muda Riau, Raja Ali, and Jan Jacob van Rochussen. This condolence letter was penned after he had received a letter informing him that King Willem II of the Netherlands had passed away. It begins with the heading, “Qawlu al-Haq”, placed at the top centre of the letter. The position of the letterhead interestingly proclaims the sender and the receiver to be equal in position (Gallop 1994: 56).

A part of the letter, the compliment, which is the content of greeting started with “Warkat al- ikhlas wa tuhfat al-ajnas”, “a variety of gift”, followed the name of the sender, “daripada kita Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali wakil mutlak...Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Besar Sultan Mahmud al Muzaffar Syah bertakhta kerajaan Negeri Riau dengan segala barang taklukan”. This letter was intended for General Governor Hindia Belanda in Batavia, “Maka barang dikuasakan Tuhan seru sekalian alam apalah kiranya datang ke hadapan maj/is Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Besar Mister van Staad Gurnadur Jenderal dari tanah Hindia Nederland, Jan Jacon van Rochussen”.

In this section of the letter, a series of greetings are addressed to Jan Jacob van Rochussen in honour of the latter’s position. He is compared to a lion, a star and an eagle. All these symbols are intended to show strength and ultimate power. For more detail, let us take note of this: Yang terhiasi dengan bintang besar yang pertama singa Nederland, dan bintang rajawali merah dari negeri Frusian, opsir besar tanda kehormatan dari negeri Perancis serta terhiasi dengan bintang besar dari negeri Brasilia yang bersemayam di atas kerajaan di Betawi.

The further content is typical of any other Malay letter that begins with the words “wa ba’duhu al kalam al-mazkur”. Then follows the core of the letter. In this section, it is described how the Riau Sultan had received a letter from Jan Van Rochussen on 12 Rajab bearing the sad news of the death of King Willem II. The sultan used the personal pronoun of “us” to express his sorrow, “Maka kita pun sangatlah menaruh kedukaan dan percintaan akan Sri Paduka Baginda Maharaja itu selama baginda maharaja bersemayam di atas takhta kerajaan Welanda maka sangatlah duka kita daripada mendengar akan...”. He then prayed that the eldest son of King Willem II, who incidentally became King Willem III could take his father’s place. He hoped that he would have a long life, and be increasingly prosperous and wealthier. In the Malay script, Gallop (1994) stated that there was mention of a gift, but I have not found that in this condolence letter.

The closing statement of the letter stated “Termaktub” has the date and year, “Di dalam istana negeri Riau, Pulau Penyengat, kepada 15 hari bulan Sya’ban al-mu’azim yaum al-Jum’at, waktu pukul 5 tarikh 1265”. The date at the end of the letter is very interesting because in *The Illumination* (1996: 52-53) the adjustment with Hijriah and Masehi has a (mistake). It is 1749. The same year is stated in the letter of Prince Suryakesuma Reganata of Madura. Whereas in the end of the letter text is stated as Masehi, Termaktu[b] di dalam



daerah negeri Pamekasan kepada 3 hari bukan Juni tahun 1849, yaitu 12 hari bulan Rajab Hijrat 1265. If we compare, in Wustenfild 1265 Hijriah is the same as 1849. It is exactly the same as it stated in the letter from Madura.

## ILLUSTRATION

The illustration in this letter is very interesting, given that the content expresses sorrow and condolence on the death of King Willem II. It also shows a correlation between sadness and the bouquet of beautiful flowers with the varied theme. This illumination could be studied in three sections: the right margin, the top margin and the left margin.

The right margin consists in turn of three sections. First, a double line frames the top section, with gold in between. The geometric motif and the basic picture of a golden swastika are highlighted with the motif of red rose and blue jasmine and green pandanus. Second, the central part contains the seal and the four edges have leaves and yellow lotuses. Third, the bottom part has a bouquet of flowers in the golden vase that lies on the lotus. This bouquet is framed with the double line with gold in the middle. The beautiful bouquet of flowers is set up with a motif of red and orange *krisan* (seashore) flowers and some other small flowers. The illustration at the bottom edge under the lotus is spiral-shaped and coloured gold, with the other edge illustrated with yellow jasmine.

In the top margin there is a flower in the shape of a dome. Inside the dome is a yellow sunflower in gold, and four stalks of red seashore flower with another small flower in colours of red, blue and yellow. The bottom edges are illustrated with a small leaf in red and blue. On the top of the dome is a circle just like a shining sun. The sunshine is illustrated in gold and in the centre are the words “Qawlu al-Haq”. Around the circle are several jasmine flower stalks. The top edge is illustrated with an interesting sunflower and the jasmine.

The left illustration is smaller encompassed in a frame. It consists of leaf and sunflower with gold spiralling over the whole frame, and is placed above the text, under the dome.

The drawing tools used are very difficult to be identified except perhaps where the golden colour is concerned. The first impression is that another colour was used with the seal to integrate it with the paper. It seemed that the illustration was prepared beforehand and then executed with golden colour on several pictures, with the text being added at the end. The same thing is also seen in the illustration on the Prince of Adipati Suryakesuma’s Letter from Madura. In that letter it seems to have been made first, integrated with the paper, and then coloured with gold, and with brown used for the grapes. This colouring process is most evident where there is no gold.

Basing oneself purely on the illustration, it is difficult to identify its origin. The patterns are Eastern, such as the lotus flower. However, the lotus is almost





a universal symbol, a spiritual flowering, and a symbol of the potentialities of the manifest world of wisdom or nirvana (Cooper 1978: 10 1). Another pattern is the *swastika*, commonly used in Buddhism. The colour of blue is very rarely found in Malay letters, as Gallop notes (1997: 3). The colour is even rarer in illuminated letters, especially the light blue found on this letter. If we go into further detail, we see that some of the patterns were influences from several parts of Asia. The lotus flower as explained above was intimately Hindu, and so is the basic motif of the swastika. This motif was found extensively throughout



Asia. In Buddhism, it is the symbol of the Buddha's heart, and the esoteric doctrine of the Buddha. Jasmine is very well known in Indonesia (Nusantara) and in Christian, it is a symbol of the virgin Mary and her grace. In Chinese society, it is a symbol of femininity. Another interesting pattern is the sunflower. For the Chinese, the sunflower represents longevity and has magical power. Among the Greeks it was a symbol of Clytie who turned into a sunflower when spurned by the sun god Apollo. The seashore flower is usually used to express sorrow, and has great symbolic value in Japan.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, the condolence letter sent to Jan Jacob Van Rochussen on the death of King Willem II has similarities and differences with an ordinary official letter. Similarities are found for example in the following: the heading of the letter, the greeting, the content and the closing. A difference is in the fact that there is no gift involved. The illustration in this condolence letter is also very interesting, showing a close relationship to the textual content, which states and expresses sorrow. The patterns used from Asia, was a close relation to Buddhism and Hinduism, such as the lotus, the swastika and the sunflower. Others such as jasmine and leaves of pandanus were usually associated with funerals. The golden colour used shows the social status of the writer. The letter and its details were appropriate to one written by a person with a high social position.

## APPENDIX

Letter from Raja Ali to Jacob van Rochussen, National Archives, Jakarta, number 4:

Bahwa ini warkat al-ikhlas wa tuhfah al-ajnas yang terbit daripada fuad al-azkiyat yang termaktub di dalamnya beberapa tabik dan selamat yaitu daripada kita Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali wakil mutlak lagi mfw-fr Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Besar Sultan Mahmud al-Muzaffar Syah bertakhta kerajaan negeri Riau dengan sekalian taklukan. Maka barang dikuasakan Tuhan seru sekalian alam apalah kiranya datang ke hadapan majlis Sri Paduka Yang Dipertuan Besar Mister van Staaad Gumadur Jenderal dari tanah Hindia Nederland Jan Jakub Rochussen yang terhiasi dengan bintang besar yang pertama maha dari singa Nederland dan bintang besar rajawali merah dari negeri Frusian dan bintang besar dari maharaja Leopold di negeri Belkhi serta lagi menjadi opsir besar tanda kehormatan dari negeri Perancis serta terhiasi dengan bintang besar dari negeri Brasilia yang bersemayam di atas kerajaan negeri Betawi. Maka barang dilanjutkan Tuhan Khalik al-'alam usia umur zamannya di dalam sehat dan selamat sejahtera 'ala ad-dawam. Wa ba'duhu al-kalam al mazkur maka adalah kita melayangkan warkat al-ikhlas ini kepada Sri Paduka sahabat kita yang hal kita sudah menerima warkat al-mahabbah daripada Sri Paduka sahabat kita kepada 12 hari bulan Rajab yaumu al-



isnain, pukul sepuluh. Maka kita sambutlah dengan sehabis-habisnya kehormatan kita. Maka kita bacalah daripada awal syatar hingga akhir yang termazkur di dalamnya pintu khabar yang memberi duka cita di atas kita serta isi negeri sekaliannya, yaitu daripada kemangkatan Sri Paduka Maharaja Willem yang kedua itu. Maka kita pun sangatlah menaruh kedukaan dan percintaan akan Sri Paduka Baginda Maharaja itu yang selama baginda maharaja itu bersemayam di atas takhta kerajaan negeri Belanda. Maka sangatlah duka kita daripada mendengar akan pemerintahan yang mendatangi ayat dengan keadilannya di atas segala rakyatnya apalagi dengan kemurahannya di atas segala hulubalang menterinya sekalian. Akan tetapi daripada sudah Tuhan yang bersifat maha dengan qudrat iradat-Nya di atas sekalian hamba-Nya maka tiadalah boleh kita salah lagi adanya. Maka sekarang telah berganti akan kerajaan itu kepada puteranya yang sulung yang memakai serta dengan menduduki nama Willem Yang Ketiga. Maka di dalam hal itu kita tersangatlah harapkan baginda maharaja Willem Yang Ketiga itu akan dilanjutkan usia umur zamannya serta dengan kekal di atas takhta kerajaannya lagi bertambah-tambah keadilannya dan kemurahannya terpiarakan di atas rakyat tentara hulubalang sekaliannya mudah-mudahan dengan mendapat nama yang kepujiannya seperti ayahanda Baginda Maharaja Willem Yang Kedua itu. Maka inilah kita memberi kehormatan dan keselamatan kepada Sri Paduka sahabat kita Mister van Staat Gurnadur Jenderal di atas nama Sri Paduka Maharaja Willem yang ketiga pengharapan kita yang tiada berkeputusan pada tiap-tiap masa dan ketika selagi ada peredaran cakrawala matahari dan bulan yang kekal kita berlindung dan bernaung di bawah kuasa bendera maharaja Nederland serta melakukan kasih sayang antara Sri Paduka sahabat kita dengan kerajaan Sri Paduka Sultan Mahmud al-Muzaffar Syah serta kita adanya suatu pun tiada tanda kita hanyalah tabik dengan hormat kita serta memberi selamat juga kepada Sri Paduka sahabat kita adanya. Termaktub di dalam istana kit a negeri Riau, Pulau Penyengat, kepada 15 hari bulan Sya'ban al-muazim yaum al-Jum'at, waktu jam pukul 5 tarikh sanat 1265.

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Mu'jizah, PhD  
Pegawai Penyelidik  
Pusat Bahasa,  
Departemen Pendidikan Nasional,  
Jakarta.

Emel: mujizah@yahoo.com